DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 803 CS 506 968

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TITLE Kenneth Burke's "Missing" Ethic.
PUB DATE Nov 89
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (75th, San Francisco, CA, November 18-21, 1989).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ethics; Rhetorical Criticism; Science and Society; *Symbolic Language; *War
IDENTIFIERS *Burke (Kenneth); Passivity; Relativism; Symbolic Action

ABSTRACT

In examining Kenneth Burke's maxim "ad bellum purificandum" (translated as "the purification of war"), it seems plausible to infer that Burke's entire system of thought was based on his outrage toward war and the misuse of symbols that makes war possible. Burke saw his criticisms of war not as mere passiveness but rather as symbolic action. Burke's writings also reflect warrantable outrage at the counter-nature created by technology. This suggests that Burke's failure to compile his views into a single form or "ethic" can be traced to his belief that Richard Weaver had already incorporated Burke's ideas into a work of his own. Although Burke left no ethic to which to appeal for answers, it is inconceivable that he would have his work read as an amoral call for ethical relativism. (SG)

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Kenneth Burke's "Missing" Ethic

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> "Because of the comic frame and other aspects of your system," said Herb Simons to Burke, "it won't let me express moral outrage." Replied Trevor Melia [called by Burke "The Meliorist"]: "The Ayatollah expresses moral outrage; so do both sides in Northern Ireland." To the question, "What do you do when you're mad at someone?," Burke replied: "I write enough drafts to get the attitude out of it and then I learn something I can use from it." I said to Simons: "He wants you to transform your moral outrage"; and Melia added: "Ad bellum purificandum." (Tompkins, 1985, p. 122)

When Star Muir's 41-page paper and William Hall's 54-page paper arrived in late October, I felt the rush of panic. After skimming them I was reminded of Kenneth Burke's definition of life itself: "Life is an unending dialogue; when we enter, it's already going on; we try to get the drift of it; we leave before it's over" (Burke, 1978, p. 33). I decided it was going to be difficult to get the drift of both dialogues in time to fulfill my responsibilities as critic for this program. And because both

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papers gave all indications of being a part of larger projects, I knew I would have to leave, as the critic of this program, before they were finished, thus depriving me of any kind of perspective by hindsight.

Thus I decided to abandon the role of critic today and to assume the role of participant in the dialogue. I was motivated to make this decision by Muir's first sentence, "A self-proclaimed 'Agro-Bohemian Neo-Stoic,' Kenneth Burke has been criticized for carrying his stoicism to extremes, for constructing a system that is essentially contemplative in nature, lacking in the capacity to express 'warrantable outrage'" (Muir, 1989, p. 1) and by Hall's last sentence, "The ethic of [Burke's] system is entirely attitudinal, successfully countering the tendency to actions based on 'warrantable moral outrage' yet supplying little else as a guide toward moral action" (Hall, 1989, p. 54).

Hall's last sentence ends with a footnote to my essay-review from which my epigraph, or representative anecdote, was quoted, and thereby changed my perspective from that of an indifferent and objective critic, quietly paring his nails while watching the proceedings, into a participant in the dialogue with a sense of moral responsibility about his own communicative conduct. Yes, ever since I attributed that "moral outrage" remark to Herb Simons in my essay-review I have felt the need to comment on it. This is my first good chance to do so. My stance on the matter is expressed, at least in part, in the last phrase of the last sentence in Muir's paper: Burke's system "is more complicated than that" (Muir, 1989, p. 41).

I do not claim to have the last word on the matter but am at the same time eager not to let Simon's claim be elevated to the status of an unquestioned assumption in Burkean studies. So, I shall try to provide some interpretations of Burke's position from a different perspective, and adopt an overall stance that things are not so neat as they have been represented.

I

Let's begin by examining again Burke's vision of ad bellum purificandum, the purification of war. I first began to think seriously about that slogan at the Burke Conference in 1984 when a philosophy professor in my discussion group admitted to being puzzled by the expression. The purification of any "substance" involves the removal of all impurities (or to use one of Burke's favorite words, "alembication") so that only the essence of the "substance" remains. Thus, said the philosopher, the slogan would point us toward war in its purest form. I tried to imagine the purest, most efficient and savage of wars, a war in which no prisoners would be taken, no weapons--whether nuclear, biological, or chemical in nature--would be withheld, a war in which none of the Geneva conventions would be observed. This interpretation of Burke's vision seemed absurd, and made understandable the philosopher's quandary. So, then I asked, what are the impurities of war? The answer was obvious; they are the unwarlike acts of cooperation, communion and love that are inevitably entangled with warlike acts. Later I realized that I had published such an interpretation in 1982, two years before the Burke Conference, without seeing at the time the connection

to the phrase, ad bellum purificandum:

> The ironic implication of identification is that it does not exist without division. When A and B are identified, they are united against others, sometimes the world. Burke calls this "the disease of cooperation." Think about the countless number of cooperative acts that must precede the destructive acts of war. Before a bomb can be dropped, it must be manufactured by the cooperative acts of designers, engineers, and workers. The crew for the bomber must be recruited and trained for the task. These elements must be brought together in a geographic sense, and they must be ready at a moment's notice to undertake the mission. Finally, all of this must be provided for by acts of Congress and the acquiescence of the public in paying taxes to finance the mission. Burke seems to be correct in suggesting that war is more understandable if we think of it, not as disagreement come to a head, but as a disease or a perversion of communion. (Tompkins, 1982, p. 48)

Is it not a plausible interpretation of ad bellum purificandum to say that Burke is urging us to eschew acts of cooperation oriented toward war? Non-cooperation with belligerence as an anti-war strategy is the message I infer from ad bellum purificandum. Notice also that war is impossible without cooperation between allies and between enemies as well. There was a profound meaning in the Vietnam-War-era question, "what if they gave a war and nobody came?" Because humans by their very nature respond cooperatively to symbols, it takes a

special effort to practice non-cooperation.

Burke's very definition of [hu]man includes the phrase, "symbol-misusing animal," indicative of a moral and ethical distinction between right and wrong communicative conduct. The definition also specifies an animal who is forever anew "moralized by the negative." Thou shalt not cooperate with war. I considered assembling in this paper all of Burke's expressions of outrage against war but decided that such a tack would constitute rhetorical overkill, and selected as an alternative course the reproduction of Burke's (1973) poem about the misuse of symbols that made possible that war in Viet Nam. Speaking of President Johnson, and wondering to what extent his policies were based on his own decisions or to what extent they were based on advice from "experts," Burke (1973, p. 272) wrote:

> He got entangled in a situation
> That would defy the best of us
> Through having access to misinformation
> That was denied the rest of us.

Burke's whole system, then, appears to be based on his outrage toward war and the misuse of symbols that makes it possible. What is the point of his essay on Mein Kampf if not to denounce unethical, symbol-misusing conduct and demagogic appeals to identification by antithesis? This act of rhetorical criticism was executed before the full consequences of Hitler's rhetorical conduct were known, before the atrocities of the Holocaust were widely known. Its publication also subjected Burke to abuse from the left as well as the right because the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was still in force. Simons and other students

of Burke ought to know that very few showed as much courage in expressing warrantable moral outrage at Nazi symbolic conduct at the time his criticism was published.

I also believe Burke has been outraged, warrantably, for longer than most by the counter-nature created by technology. He explains in the 1955 introduction to Attitudes Toward History that the changes in the twenty some years since the book was first published include the "invention of technical devices that would make the rapid obliteration of all human life an easily available possibility. Up to now, human stupidity could go to fantastic lengths of destructiveness, yet always mankind's hopes of recovery could be born anew" (1937/1984, p. vi). Thus, Burke's early aversion to technology is based in the "perfection" of the weapons of war. What is usually missed in his tirades against technology--how excited he was recently to discover that neither Marx nor Engels used the term--is that he excoriates the communicative conduct of "furtive" identifications, e.g., the specialist who claims a disciplinary loyalty while concealing a corporate interest in activities that prepare for war or pollute the environment--the illusion of "autonomy" (see Tompkins, 1985).

And if his pacifist attitudes or comic frame seem too passive for some, providing insufficient warrant for action, consider that "'frames of acceptance' are not the same as passiveness" (Burke, 1937/1984, p. 20), and that all of those words he uttered and wrote about war are for him a form of symbolic action. That would, of course, include his speech, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," delivered to the American

Writer' Congress in 1934, in which he both conceived and enacted the theory of identification by treating the audience of revolutionary rhetoric as "people" as well as "workers." Here was revolutionary criticism and revolutionary theory, both a form of praxis, that "brought down on his head charges that he was a dupe of fascism who naively employed the rhetorical methods of Hitler" (Lentricchia, 1983, pp. 32-3).

I have been puzzled ever since the Burke Conference that Simons, in his various pronouncements about moral outrage, has never referred to the paper by Cheney and Tompkins (1984), "Toward an Ethic of Identification," which was submitted to him for the Burke Conference. That paper, at odds with Simons' position, attempted to synthesize Burke's comments about the ethics of rhetoric, particularly the ethics of identification, and argued that Burke's composite ethic is deontological in nature, one in which the concept of duty or right conduct is privileged over the consequences of actions, and as such stands in opposition to a teleological view in which right conduct leads to the "good."

Burke's emphasis on the comic frame, accepting Muir's equations on page seven, tragedy=war and comedy=peace, is nothing more than the suggestion that people resist the completion of the circle that ultimately underlies both tragedy and comedy, and serves as an admonition to transform outrage which could facilitate the tragedy of war into acts productive of the beneficial effects of the comic and the educational--the means of peace. And that gives me the chance to introduce one of my favorite passages from Burke:

> The progress of humane enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as vicious, but as mistaken. When you add that people are necessarily mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that every insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle, returning again to the lesson of humility that underlies great tragedy. The audience, from its vantage point, sees the operation of errors that the characters of the play cannot see; thus seeing from two angles at once, it is chastened by dramatic irony; it is admonished to remember that when intelligence means wisdom (in contrast with the modern tendency to look upon intelligence as merely a coefficient of power for heightening our ability to get things, be they good things or bad), it requires fear, resignation, the sense of limits, as an important ingredient. (Burke, 1937/1984, p. 41-2)

II

Before making my second and final point, I hasten to express my admiration for the papers before us today. I learned much from them, even though I cannot accept all of their initial assumptions and conclusions. It was while considering the heroic efforts of Muir and Hall that made their papers possible--the laborious search for relevant statements on ethics in the work of Burke--that I began to realize and contemplate the lacuna in that work: no lengthy summarizing statement on ethics. How can we explain this gap? Here is my representative anecdote about

Kenneth Burke's "missing" ethic.

On February 25, 1987, a cold and snowy night in Boulder, Colorado, I introduced Burke to a large audience which had braved the harsh weather to pay tribute to him as well as to hear his lecture, "Kinds of Symbolic Action and the Growing Range of Technology." He entertained questions at the end of his formal talk. A graduate student in philosophy posed a long, rambling periodic question that made sense only in its concluding clause which invited Burke to comment on Richard Weaver's (1953) book, The Ethics of Rhetoric.

Without a pause and with a degree of fluency I have rarely heard from Burke, he explained that Weaver had sat in on a seminar he, Burke, once taught at the University of Chicago, writing down everything Burke said, and never saying a word during the entire course. Some time later The Ethics of Rhetoric was published.

The audience was stunned, and I think it is fair to say that many if not most of us were morally outraged by the revelation. Over dinner at the home of a colleague in the English Department, K.B. returned to the subject and said that although Weaver had developed a conservative ideology foreign to his own "Marxoid" orientation, Weaver had appropriated so many of Burke's ideas that he, Burke, lost all interest in writing his own ethic. It could be shown fairly easily that some of Weaver's original "ideas" had already been published by Burke when Weaver's book appeared in 1953.

In preparation for this panel, for example, I read Weaver's book and found three references to Burke, one to Attitudes toward

History, one to A Grammar of Motives, and in one case the phrase "imagery of killing" is quoted from Burke but no source is given. Why would he cite the source of the quote in two cases and not in the third, I wondered at the time, and considered the possibility that Weaver intended to deflect the reader's attention from the uncited source.

I also found a couple of ideas, introduced as if original to the book, which had been published earlier by Burke. Weaver's (1953) distinction between positive and dialectical terms can be found on p. 188 and other pages. His discussion of "god terms" is similarly introduced on p. 212 as part of his chapter on "Ultimate Terms in Contemporary Rhetoric." I then found Burke's discussion of "god-terms" on pp. 299 ff., in A Rhetoric of Motives (1950/1969), first published three years before Weaver's book. Incorrectly remembering that Burke developed the concepts of "positive" and "dialectic" terms in Attitudes Toward History, I conducted two long searches before realizing that if Weaver had borrowed ideas from that book he probably would not have cited it elsewhere. Remembering that the "imagery of killing" appears in A Rhetoric of Motives (1950/1969), I developed the hunch that this must be the book from which Weaver sought to deflect his readers. Sure enough, Burke develops the concepts of "positive," "dialectical," and "ultimate" terms in the Rhetoric (pp. 183 ff.), published a full three years before Weaver's. No doubt other similarities could be shown. What would be more difficult to prove is how many of Weaver's original "ideas" were first developed orally by Burke in the seminar as

preparation for his own projected ethic.

Thus we have a bitter irony. Richard Weaver has been accorded a high place in modern theory as an ethicist of rhetoric. Kenneth Burke is criticized for the absence of an ethic of rhetoric. No, things are not so simple as that.

Our inquiry today would be much simpler if we could only appeal to Burke's "missing" ethic for answers. In its absence we have to rely on our ability to read Burke with frames of acceptance as well as rejection, and make some informed and textually-grounded inferences. During a conversation with Burke during his visit to Boulder in 1987, K.B. felt secure enough to confess the most intimate "sins" of his long life. In this dialogue, as in every one I have been privileged to have with him, he was a man who acted <u>as</u> <u>if</u> there is a God who expects him to observe the highest principles of duties and right conduct. It is inconceivable to me that he would have us, however ingeniously, read his work as an amoral call for ethical relativism.

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